



TAKE FIVE

THESE PROMISING YOUNG ARTISTS ARE HELPING ICELAND
DEFINE ITS OWN DESIGN IDENTITY

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The mural-covered

Hönnunarmiðstöð, Iceland's tiny design centre, tucked into a car park next to the city's duck pond, is a whitewashed flurry of keyboards and MacBooks ahead of the Design March Festival, held every spring, bringing internationally acclaimed designers together with Iceland's emerging talent.

More than 1 000km across the Norwegian Sea from the rest of the Nordic countries – and very much on the periphery of the minimal, functional Scandinavian design movement – the young country has yet to define its own design identity.

"That's our strong point," says Hönnunarmiðstöð MD Halla Helgadóttir.

Sweden, Finland and Denmark have a strong heritage of materials and craftsmanship, she says,

"but we don't have that background. I think we're a newcomer in the Nordic design scene, and it might be said that we're quite experimental. We are quite young, we're a bit inhibited, but it's also the way we are a bit as a nation." She grins. "I sometimes say, 'We don't know what is not possible, so we just go ahead and do it.'"

Iceland's 2008 banking crash has had some unexpected side effects, spurring on the burgeoning local design scene, as focus turned to smaller-scale projects, closer to home.

With a growing arts academy in the capital, a booming tourist industry, an economy emerging from financial crisis and a population of under 350 000, the country is looking for strategic investments.

"We don't have our design stars yet but that's a great opportunity. There's room for stars to emerge."

AURUM DESIGN

Guðbjörg Kristín Ingvarsdóttir

aurum.is

"Reindeer hoof is such a strong material," says Guðbjörg Kristín Ingvarsdóttir, pointing at a shard around her neck. "It's amazing."

Danish-trained but Icelandic at heart, Ingvarsdóttir returned home wanting to define her own aesthetic, and found her inspiration in what she saw around her.

Her latest line – to be unveiled in London later this year – features pieces of reindeer hoof, paired with contrasting cast silver, to bring out the fine white marks on the dark surface.

"I was approached by an Icelandic farmer in Greenland, with 30 000 reindeer, and he wanted to see what we could do with the hooves. Otherwise he was just throwing them away," she says.

Ingvarsdóttir caresses her necklace. "The different scratches, they tell their story, of each reindeer." And the raw shapes she's playing with are a nod to the landscape of Iceland's rugged northern neighbour.

It's an ongoing theme in her work: a desire to include a piece of her natural surroundings in her delicate pieces.

"I spent months trying to shape Icelandic lava into pieces of jewellery, but it kept breaking. Iceland's still quite young, you know, and the lava's just not strong enough to do small round pieces."



She eventually gave up, and now imports her lava from Indonesia, adding silver lichen to the foreign rocks.

Ingvarsdóttir spends her summers in an isolated house in west Iceland, on the slopes below the Drangajökull ice cap, with no electricity, no cellphone reception and fresh water straight from the river.

Her leaves – a recurring signature in her silverwork – emerged on one of her summer walks.

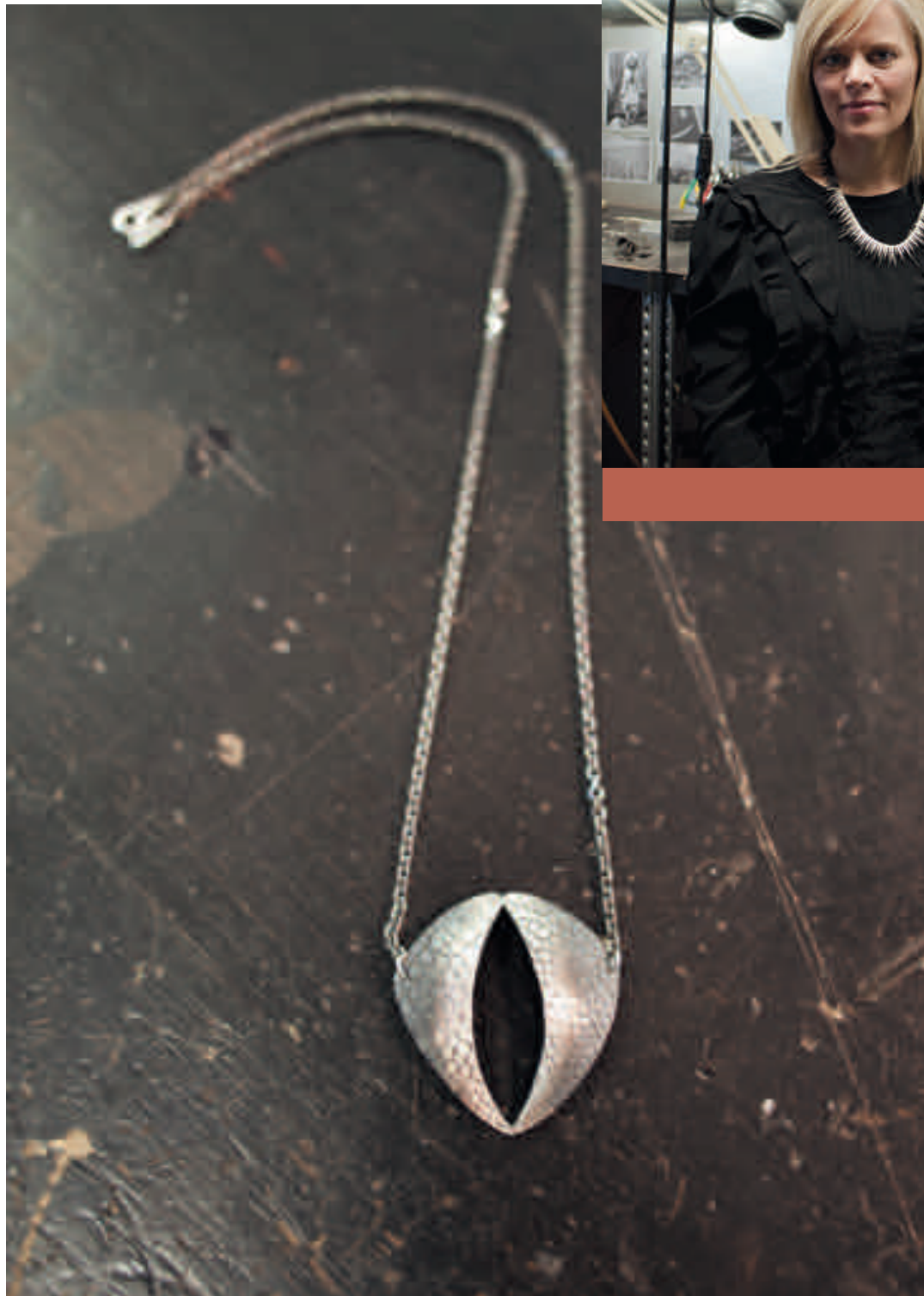
A few years later, she found her summer house surrounded by swans, so she collected their strewn feathers and did a collection inspired by birds: the falcon, swan and raven, all of whom feature heavily in Icelandic myths; a tribute to her childhood in Eyjafjörður, a place rich in legend.

"Last year, I caught a salmon in the Miða i Dölum, and was struck by inspiration. The result is a collection of precious fish fins, sweeping across décolletages and fingers."

In her Reykjavik workshop, nestled behind her store, Ingvarsdóttir works mostly in silver, but is expanding into gold and bronze.

"I think our aesthetic is evolving, becoming more timeless. It used to be experimental, very young," she says.

"Here I just do what I want to do. It's good to be free."



design



FARMERS MARKET Bergþóra Guðnadóttir and Jól Pálsson

farmersmarket.is

A clothing designer and jazz saxophonist, Bergþóra Guðnadóttir and Jól Pálsson are a couple with a creative streak. “We got fed up with the globalism movement ... How everyone was doing the same thing across countries,” says Pálsson. “Living this lifestyle in the financial bubble, we couldn’t see how it would work, how it could be sustainable. So we wanted to do something closer to home.”

Prioritising environmental and business sustainability, the pair established Farmers Market in 2005, with Guðnadóttir at the design helm and Pálsson running the business end, after his morning jazz rehearsals.

It’s a cosy set up. The clothing is rugged and warm, with a muted colour palette. Their friends star in their ad campaigns. And although they now outsource some of their manufacturing to other EU countries – due to a lack of local capacity – they’re still the biggest single buyer

of Icelandic wool. “All the wool in Iceland goes to one co-operative mill,” Guðnadóttir explains, “and lots have been closing in other countries. We wanted to bring this yarn back.”

Now, they’re looking at producing their own range of yarn from local undyed wool, from sheep of different shades.

One of their best-selling items is their interpretation of the *lopapeysur*, now considered the “traditional” Icelandic sweater.

But it actually isn’t that old. “The pattern emerged in the 1950s, the 1960s,” Pálsson says, “and you see similar patterns from South America.”

Guðnadóttir has been designing slimmer cuts, with a lighter factory knit, although part of their collection is still hand-knitted by the woman who once babysat her son.

Alongside the sweaters, there are leopard-print

woollen ponchos and bobbly hats, tweed coats and sharply cut oilskin jackets.

The collection isn’t seasonal, in an effort to stay true to their philosophy of sustainability. Their line is now selling as far off as Japan.

Each summer, the family go camping in the wild.

“We just drove until the road stopped,” says Guðnadóttir. “You grow up with inspiration from the landscape. It infuses your system.”

She also draws ideas from her kitchen. “Mixing tastes is like mixing colours.” Her family heritage – Danish and French – also influences her style.

Twenty years ago, the fashion industry here was outdoor clothes, out of necessity. “It’s so young,” she says. “It’s a mix between craft and fashion. People just don’t understand how designers work.”

“We like to mess with that,” Pálsson grins.





HUGDETTA Róshildur Jónsdóttir and Snæbjörn Þór Stefansson

www.hugdetta.com

A line of delicate little figures traipse across the top of the piano in Róshildur Jónsdóttir and Snæbjörn Þór Stefansson's living room. Constructed from the fish bones of cod, haddock and wolffish, they look like fragile manifestations of a wild imagination.

"It was about using all of the animal," says Jónsdóttir of her model-making sets: fish bones sourced from factories across the country, treated with enzymes and packaged to look like children's toys. Her first painted figures, part of her graduation project from Iceland's Academy of the Arts, were modelled on the Transformers figurines.

"Why import when you can use beautiful local materials?" she shrugs.

Their birch dining chair retains its knots from its tree branches.

"There was an old man up north, who had a barn full of wood, and his wife allowed me to take some," Jónsdóttir says. "There's a lot of soul in it."

Snæbjörn has been working on a series of aluminium wall brackets that are sculptures in their own right. Shaped out of Icelandic clay, they are then cast in aluminium – a nod to the smelters around the country, using the plentiful local water supply.

"The clay is hard to work with, it can't stretch. It's not any good, so that's why I like it."

For the pair of product and interior designers, the emphasis is on conceptual design and process, producing pieces that are art pieces in themselves. But there's wit too.

Snæbjörn spent hours glueing 100 circles of plywood together, in a form replica of the world's most expensive vase ever sold.

On their kitchen wall, a blue and white porcelain plate – a contemporary reinterpretation of the traditional collector's items from Icelandic homes – depicts the pattern of private consumption in Iceland between 1990 and 2009, when the lines plunge into nowhere.

"The crisis was actually good for designers and manufacturers," Stefansson says. "It was a huge turning point. Before, there was no production here, they couldn't compete with imports ... People are now really trying to support local design."

The couple's design label, Hugdetta, translates as "thoughtfall".

"It's literally the moment an idea falls into your mind," Jónsdóttir smiles.

In 2011, the couple opened Grettisborg, a small apartment hotel in an old stone house behind their home, in the centre of Reykjavik. It's filled with furniture they designed and produced locally. Since then, they've designed rehabilitation centres for children, and spent a summer in New York doing the interiors for a new Scandinavian restaurant.

"Icelandic designers are trying to develop their own voice. And now, with more attention from abroad, the future's very bright."